ANNEX A: LESSONS ON HOW TO ENSURE EVALUATIONS ARE INFLUENTIAL

A consistent theme in this volume is that utilization of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) information is necessary for the system to be considered a "success." This is partly an issue of a government obtaining the maximum benefit from its M&E efforts—reflecting the cost-effectiveness of the M&E system.

However, low utilization is not only a missed opportunity; it can also pose a threat to the sustainability of the system. Government officials usually do not view evaluations as having inherent merit, so there would likely be little enthusiasm for continuing to invest large amounts of money in evaluations that were being ignored.

Utilization is particularly important in the early years of an M&E system, before it has been fully established and accepted as part of the normal business of government. In this initial period it is important for evaluations to have a powerful demonstration effect—through demonstrating their usefulness—by persuading unconvinced or skeptical senior officials that M&E is worthwhile and has real value to the government (see chapter 3 for a discussion of the different ways in which evaluations can be used by governments). In other words, during the start-up phase of an M&E system it is important to make every evaluation count. This puts an onus on the managers of an M&E system to plan their evaluations carefully.

The same definition of success of an M&E system can be applied to an individual evaluation. And this naturally leads to the question, "What does it take for an evaluation to be used intensively—to be influential?" The following discussion draws on an in-depth analysis of eight evaluations that have been found to be highly influential; this study lists a number of detailed lessons on how to design an influential evaluation (Bamberger, Mackay, and Ooi 2004, 2005). These lessons are also consistent with the academic literature on evaluation utilization (for example, Patton 1997), and with the findings of the Bank's own Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) concerning the utilization of its own evaluations (IEG 2006). Five main lessons are summarized here:

1. The importance of a conducive policy or management environment. An evaluation's findings and recommendations are much more likely to be used if they address important policy issues that the government is currently addressing. For example, a newly elected government might have decided to considerably expand the level of support to the unemployed but might be uncertain of the most cost-effective means of doing so. Evaluations of alternative types of government intervention, such as job creation, wage subsidies, or training programs for the unemployed, would be very helpful to the government's decisions (see box 8.2 for an example from Australia).

A conducive environment would also include the commitment of the management of an agency to implementing an evaluation's findings—perhaps because the agency has a strong service orientation and managers and staff are keen to provide the best possible quality of service to their clients. In this situation it could be said that the agency possesses a strong service or performance culture.

2. The timing of the evaluation. The likelihood that an evaluation's findings and recommendations will be used is greatly enhanced when they become available in time to have input for policy or management decisions. Thus, Chile's finance ministry plans its evaluations carefully, with the budget deadlines firmly in mind, to ensure that evaluations will be completed in time for their results to be used by policy analysts and decision makers in the current budget cycle (chapter 6).

This puts a particular priority on planning and managing the timing of each evaluation. But it can be difficult to anticipate opportunities to influence the government's policy agenda, which could be influenced by unforeseen circumstances, such as a change in government or a macroeconomic crisis.

An example of an evaluation completed too late to influence a government's policy decision is provided in annex B, box B.2. An incoming government in Colombia decided to terminate a job-creation program before the evaluation's findings became available.

As it turned out, these findings were critical of the program's performance relative to the program objectives. A rigorous impact evaluation was conducted. These can provide the most in-depth and reliable evaluation findings, but they can usually only be conducted after the program has been operating long enough that its outcomes and impacts have revealed themselves. And this type of evaluation can also take a long time to conduct, especially if a considerable amount of data needs to be collected.

This example from Colombia highlights the trade-offs the managers of an M&E system have to consider when deciding which programs to evaluate, which type of evaluation methodology to use, and when there might be a good opportunity to influence the government's policy debate.

3. Understanding the potential role of evaluation. Evaluators need to avoid the misconception that their findings and recommendations will be—and should be—the main influence on government policy makers or managers. Rather, an evaluation is usually only one of many sources of information and influence on government, only one piece of the puzzle. Ideally, an evaluation will provide new knowledge and understanding.

Sometimes governments use evaluation findings to justify decisions they would have made in any case, particularly if those decisions might have been unpopular. Or an evaluation might provide the final "nail in the coffin" for an underperforming program. Evaluation recommendations that focus on detailed implementation issues would typically be less controversial than recommendations relating to the overall worth of the program or whether the program should continue or be abolished. A particularly useful role for an evaluator is to bring a fresh, external perspective.

4. Who should conduct the evaluation. For an evaluation to be influential requires that the evaluator be perceived as credible, objective, and competent. In many situations this will also require that the evaluator is viewed as independent from the program—and sometimes also the agency—being evaluated. In Latin American countries, it is usual for evaluations to be conducted externally; this stands in contrast with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, where it is more usual for evaluations to be conducted internally (see part VI). Thus, there can be a trade-off between the objectivity, independence, and credibility of evaluations and the evaluator's understanding of the program and the ownership of the evaluation findings by the program manager and staff.

The expertise of internal or external evaluators is another issue to consider here. One way to combine the benefits of both approaches—internal and external evaluations—is to ensure that both internal and external stakeholders play an oversight role in the evaluation, regardless of whether the evaluation is conducted internally or externally.

5. Building a relationship with the client and communicating and marketing evaluation findings and recommendations. Another fallacy, and one apparently held by many evaluators and managers of evaluation offices, is that the evaluator's job is simply to produce competent evaluation reports. Similarly, dissemination of an evaluation's findings and recommendations might (naively) be viewed as mailing out the evaluation report to a long list of names and addresses.

When conducting an evaluation it is important for the evaluator to maintain a good relationship with key stakeholders, including in particular the principal client that commissioned the evaluation. The client should be kept fully informed about the progress of the evaluation, and key stakeholders should be informed before the evaluation is completed about the likely findings, especially if these would be controversial. In other words, there should be no surprises.

Communication and knowledge management are particularly important for evaluation offices. Thus, another important function for both evaluators and evaluation offices is to extract the key findings that are likely to be most relevant and useful to key stakeholders. Stakeholders include policy makers and program managers. Senior officials usually do not have the time to read lengthy evaluation reports, so it is helpful to provide short, easy-to-read executive summaries and to prepare précis documents that identify the most relevant, notable findings and recommendations.

More sophisticated approaches to knowledge management include, for example: the use of evaluation Web sites (both for individual evaluations and for the evaluation office's library of evaluation findings); formal launches of evaluation reports, including seminars and conferences; and maintenance of a dissemination list of key stakeholders who have expressed an interest in receiving evaluation summaries. IEG, which has been in existence since 1973, now uses its extensive library of evaluation findings to address immediate needs for evaluative findings and lessons of experience (IEG 2006, chapter 3).

It is doing this through a new type of "quick-turnaround" products, including notes and presentations and briefing papers for Bank senior managers, line managers, and staff. One example of this is the materials prepared at short notice concerning lessons for dealing with natural disasters; these were prepared in the wake of the major earthquake in Pakistan in 2005.

The Importance of Measuring Utilization

Related to all this is the importance of an evaluation office knowing the extent to which its evaluations are actually being used, and for what specific purposes. This is particularly important for a newly established evaluation office, whose sustainability might not be assured. Where utilization is not high, it will be necessary to take specific steps to increase it.

IEG is actually one good practice model. It prepares an annual review of the evaluation activities of the World Bank's operational areas. This review also includes a self-evaluation of IEG's own evaluation activities, including the perceptions of key stakeholders concerning the value of IEG's evaluation work. These stakeholders include the Bank's Board and staff, including country directors, sector managers, and task team leaders (who manage the Bank's lending projects). Focus groups and structured interviews are conducted with samples of individuals in each of these groups. The main issues these focus groups and interviews address are the use and usefulness of IEG's evaluation findings, products, and information and the challenges, incentives, and disincentives to using M&E information in their work.

As part of the same self-evaluations, IEG also conducts internal surveys of large numbers of World Bank staff, Board members, and their advisors. It also conducts external surveys of external clients including governments, donor organizations, nongovernmental organizations, academia, and the general public. These surveys focus on specific IEG evaluation reports. They ask questions about—

- Readership and awareness of these reports
- Perceptions of their quality (relevance, ease of understanding, conciseness of presentation, timeliness, usefulness of recommendations, unbiased and objective analysis, transparency and clarity of the methodology, strength of the link between conclusions and evidence, depth of analysis, and whether all available information was incorporated)

- Extent of influence of the evaluation, such as on respondents' understanding of the subject area
- Use of the evaluation (for Bank staff, various possible categories of use in their work are investigated, such as in their provision of advice, their work to design new strategies, and in modifying existing Bank projects and strategies)
- How to improve the quality of the recommendations in IEG's evaluations.

The findings from such focus groups, interviews, and surveys can be quite eye opening for an evaluation office and for individual evaluators too. Such approaches apply the same rigor to an evaluation office as the office would apply to the programs it evaluates. This, in turn, can help to enhance the credibility and influence of the evaluation office.